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SOME SALIENT WEAKNESSES OF PROHIBITION IN THE LIGHT OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS.

BY THE REV. P. GAVAN DUFFY.

THIS is no strenuous attack upon prohibitionists and still less is it a defence of what we term the "liquor interests." The purpose of the writer is simply to inquire, from the standpoint of Christian ethics, into the principles of prohibition.

The great wave of total abstinence which has swept, and is still sweeping, over the English-speaking world, is something that will stand out in history as phenomenal. Not only here in America are its influences seen and felt, so that the distillers and brewers are suggesting among themselves the advisability of setting their house in order, but in England, in addition to the moral wave of self-restraint in the use of intoxicants which has swept the country, radical legislation is threatening more and more an enforced restriction.

The end prohibitionists aim at is an ideal—the hastening of the day when drinking and the countless evils that grow, unquestionably, out of its excess shall be no more. And, with such an ideal before them, it is not surprising that a large proportion of Anglo-Saxon humanity should be warmly enlisted in a movement that claims to make for it.

But, as in the case of many other movements for reform, so with prohibition, there is a danger of much thoughtlessness in its advocates and followers, which, unless squarely faced, may only lead to the rearing of a structure on an utterly insecure foundation. The twentieth century suffers from haste. We want to accomplish great ends in a hurry. It is historically characteristic of the beginning and closing of a century, that the people then living are unduly impressed with the notion that they are essentially the ones on whom the ends of the world have come.

It is, therefore, not surprising that we should find the movements of the age tinged with that undue haste which is always an evil, and especially so because it is rarely seen by the people cotemporary with the times. The jerry-built house, with its manifold defects, is not only distressing but dangerous. Similarly, moral reforms instituted for speedily accomplishing desired ends, without due and careful consideration of everything which they involve, are apt to be distressing and dangerous.

Zealotism of every description is full of perils, chief among them being the tendency to rush to hasty conclusions which facts will not warrant. Thus it invariably produces a strange but familiar blend of truth and error.

One great danger to-day with prohibitionists is the tendency to make their movement synonymous with Christianity and to base their principles confusedly upon what they suppose to be the principles of Christ. They fall into the common error of quoting from a fickle memory without verifying their references. Still another mistake is the manner in which they confound the cardinal virtue of temperance with prohibition, whereas the only relation in which the latter can be looked upon as being in any sense a Christian virtue, is when its exercise is along the lines of religious asceticism in the name of Christ. And even then, as we shall show, it is clearly a matter of expediency rather than a Christian principle.

The evidence for these two statements is to be seen in the tendency to wink at other moral defects in men, provided they are free from the taint of drink, making practically the sum and substance of the Christian Religion to consist mainly in abstinence; and the regarding of the really temperate man as a foe to what prohibitionists inaccurately term temperance.

Looking at the whole matter from the standpoint of Christian ethics, the question that must arise is, Have prohibitionists faced fairly and squarely the attitude of Christ to this vexing problem? And, apparently, the answer must be "No." Indeed, here lies the chief difficulty with prohibitionism—the attitude of Christ is distinctly against it.

There was no tinge of asceticism about our Lord; He came into the world eating and drinking and, because He shared in the actual life of rich and poor in this way, He was termed by many

a wine-bibber. And standing out in direct challenge of the prohibitionist's position is the fact of the miracle at the marriage feast in Cana of Galilee. For a moment one is almost overwhelmed by the great quantity of wine given on that occasion by Christ. Each of the six stone water-pots might have contained anywhere from ten and a half to twenty-five and a half gallons, and an eminent authority like Edersheim inclines to the larger measure. But, if in either case we multiply by six it is made clear that the Incarnate gave in this, as in all things, abundantly. To assert that only what was actually drawn from the pots became wine is but to trifle with the question and then not to alter in the least the principle involved. And to follow the interpretation of extremists, viz.: that the wine was really unfermented grape juice, is to lose the meaning of the miracle, and to ignore the words of the ruler of the feast, who, when he "had *tasted* the water that was made wine," said, "Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine; and when men have well drunk, then that which is worse: but thou hast kept the good wine until now." Unfermented grape juice would scarcely elicit such an exclamation of delighted surprise at this departure from ordinary practice! Further, the inference from his remark is that moderation was not always the rule, even on such occasions as this, and that by the end of a feast guests might have absorbed so much wine that it would be difficult for them to distinguish the good wine from the poorer quality. It is this fact which makes the miracle stand out the more conspicuously—even startlingly.

One, indeed, is particularly struck by the fact that, face to face with the drink problem, Christ said so little bearing upon the subject. Confessedly, it is a difficulty with prohibitionists. From their standpoint it was clearly the seeming duty of our Lord to adopt a directly opposite course and to preach and teach with all His energies against what they understand to be the greatest evil and curse to mankind.

It is only when we cool down from the boiling heat of the zealot to the calm consideration of dispassionate inquiry, that we are conscious of the lessons Christ was practically but silently teaching in the miracle we have been speaking of. First, He clearly recognized that wine was a creature of God and a higher creation than water; secondly, He manifested His unbounded trust in humanity, which, later, even crucifixion could not kill; thirdly,

He tacitly taught that the responsibility for excess rested upon the individual and not upon the thing abused.

And this last reason, perhaps, is the serious point of cleavage between Christ and the prohibitionist—the one placing the responsibility for abuse upon the abuser, and the other shifting it from the abuser to the thing abused.

In other words, Christ taught men self-control, which is but another name for temperance. Men must be masters of themselves, and where they would not be (not because they *could* not be, but because they *thought* they could not be), He issues the prohibitory injunction, “If thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell.” In these words He unwaveringly and unqualifiedly warns men of the eternal consequences of excess, and just as clearly and as unqualifiedly places prohibition on a lower plane than temperance—it is a maimed life, halted, imperfect. Enforced asceticism was an expedient intended to safeguard the weak-willed, and it was justifiable only on the ground and for the reason of gaining eternal salvation.

Here it is worthy of note that the historic Church has consistently maintained this principle. As far back in the early history of Christendom as the Apostolical Canons, we find Canon 51 pronouncing judgment upon Bishops, Priests and Deacons, who, for any other cause than the exercise of the ascetic life, profess an abhorrence for wine as well as flesh meat and marriage. On the ground that such offenders calumniate and blaspheme the workmanship of God in forgetting that He made all things and made them good, the Clergy are to be sentenced to deposition and both clergy and laity offending were to be cast out of the Church. From this it will be seen that, if there is to-day a wide and great gulf between the churches claiming a Catholic heritage (Roman, Anglican and Greek) and the churches of Puritan origin on the question of prohibition, the further we go back the wider the breach becomes.

Next, it must be insisted that, from the standpoint of Christian ethics, temptation is to be met and overcome. This is to be the line of Christian conduct and Christian development; not a concentration of effort in a futile attempt to remove temptation or escape it. It is a spiritual law, as exact as the law of gravitation, that temptation never can or will be removed in this life.

It is conceivable that a man can, and frequently does, become the master of this or that particular temptation, but he remains the master of what has existed, does exist and always will exist.

Therefore, to sweep away every saloon, to close up tight every beer garden, to make the drug-store supply of intoxicants an impossibility, would in no sense remove temptation; for the main force of temptation is *within* the man and not without. It might in some measure, for the weak-willed who have no self-control, be said to diminish temptation, but certainly not to destroy it, for the chief difficulty lies in the uncontrolled appetite. And just so long as the appetite remains the master, the subject will yield again and again; so that, if it were possible to destroy every saloon and distillery and to put an end to all present known intoxicating drinks, the debased appetite, spurred by its craving, would seek till it found some other and, perchance, worse stimulant. Every clergyman who deals with moral disease is familiar with the person who has been whiskey-cured to become drug-crazed, and with the common type of those who think they have conquered a besetting sin when they have only merely exchanged it for another.

It is an unfailing law that the existence of appetite connotes that there is food wherewith to satisfy it, and the only question for moralists is the regulation of its lawful use and the prevention of its abuse. Consequently, to place the blame on the thing abused and not upon the abuser, is to evade the whole question. And just so long as the prohibitionist continues to fix the responsibility for the drunkard's downfall upon the drink he abuses, rather than upon the drunkard himself, just so long will he furnish the excuse the abuser is looking for in the evasion of responsibility.

This evasion is as old as Adam. When God called him to account for his sin in the Garden of Eden, he immediately placed the blame upon the woman, and the woman in her turn placed it upon the serpent. But both knew all the time in their guilty hearts that the responsibility could only be laid at their own doors. True, they were tempted, but it was evidently the Divine intention that unfallen man should be tempted. Humanly speaking, temptation is a necessary consequence to man's free-will. The forbidden tree which stood in the garden was always before the eyes of our first parents. In itself it was a temptation, but, so far from being there to harm them, it was, if resisted, to be

a means of development. The sin lay not in the temptation, but in the perversion of the human will which challenged temptation and led to the eating of the fruit.

And just because temptation was and is a necessity for man's development and progress then and now, God still suffers it. The expediency of the prohibitionist in his futile attempt to remove temptation was certainly not God's method, and for this life it never can be.

The only basis of reform, then, is through the individual; the building up of his moral strength and will-power which will result in self-control. This clearly is the work of the Christian Church, and the only solution of the problem. Regulate the saloon by all means; rid it of its debasing conditions, or change the method of supply of intoxicants by abolishing the saloon, if needs be, for governmental control and sale, or some other judicious method—all this may be well and good and wise, but the one essential that must ever be kept in view is to teach men to be masters of their appetites. When this is done, the problem is solved.

If one has a nervous horse that shies at posts and pillars in a town, it is manifestly absurd and impossible to remove each and every obstacle that abounds. This would be no sane education of the animal. The danger lies not in the post the horse shies at, but in the beast itself. Therefore, the wise driver will continue to lead or whip his horse up to the disturbing cause to teach it control.

On the practical side of the present-day prohibitionism there is manifested manifold defects. Men will never be legislated into real morality, and, in pinning so much faith and value to law as a moral reformer, the prohibitionist is evidencing a decided weakness of his system. It is here that haste is so destructive. It has taken nineteen hundred years of Christian teaching to bring mankind to the state of control it has at present. It is foolish in the extreme to suppose that now in a few short years, by acts of legislation, we are going to root out a moral difficulty. It is the haste, the wanting to see results, that is the root of all this. To a large degree it is in its motive commendable, but plainly impossible, if past history is of any value.

As a consequence, we find men acting on impulse, clamoring for legislation which is not truly reflective of the corporate or

community Ego. The ethical value of law lies not in the law itself, but in its reflecting and recording of public thought—so that no law is stronger than public opinion.

So it often follows, even in local-option towns, that men have voted for what they were not inwardly willing to maintain for themselves. The thought has been for the “other fellow,” and then, when the restraint their votes had imposed has been felt personally, the tendency is to dissemble—to become a creature of appearances. Hence the display of moral cowardice is nowhere more deplorably in evidence than in prohibition states and local-option towns. The man who wants his liquor gets it surreptitiously from the drug-store, or in the unmarked packages that are shipped by express, or from the pocket peddler. In each case he is apt to drink concoctions which are full of impurities—sometimes vile and health-destroying—or, he has recourse to the more respectable method of buying patent medicines, containing anywhere from ten to seventy-five per cent. of alcohol, with the advantage of feeling free to point the finger of reproach at the open drinker with his bottle of beer containing four per cent. of alcohol! Each year he, perchance, votes “no license” to measure up to the standard of artificiality, and congratulates himself that he can successfully humbug his neighbors when they only *think* they are humbugging him!

As a consequence of all this, the disease is driven *in*, and the danger, as a result, terribly increased. The words of the Bishop of Vermont in a recent sermon in London, in which he warned the English people against acting hastily, by dwelling upon the dangers of the hidden disease of drink in America—the result of prohibition—are words that will be weighed by all except fanatics.

The writer speaks as one who is familiar with the practical results of prohibition in prohibition States in east and west, and as one who has long studied the question. It is clear to his mind, at least, that the weaknesses of that system are manifest in the manner which he has set forth.

Surely it were better to frankly face the whole situation, even at the risk of a shock to religious prejudices or the ideals of well-meaning prohibitionists, than to go on, blind to facts, pursuing the impossible for our time. Moral reforms never come in a hurry, and none that is lasting has come purely as a result

of a legislative act. The seat of moral disease is within the man. And, after all, as we have shown, drunkenness is but the excessive indulgence of an appetite which the example of the world's greatest Reformer shows us has a perfectly legitimate use. To turn back to that cardinal virtue translated into Christianity from Greek Philosophy, and blessed in the Name of Christ, Temperance, it may be confidently believed that self-control offers the wisest course for the general run of humanity. So it becomes the duty of the Christian Church to rescue the name of this virtue, which prohibitionists have perverted into a synonym for total abstinence, and to inculcate it and its powers into men's hearts.

When Christendom ceases to rely upon Caesar to effect moral reforms and depends alone upon the powers Christ committed to His Church; when she eschews haste and devotes herself to influencing her members to contribute all they can contribute to the work of building up in their contemporaries, as in themselves, moral strength and self-control, in this as in all things, then, and only then, will each successive generation be practically helping to solve the problem that to many seems to defy solution to-day.

We go back to the Master with this vexing question and we find Him standing calmly in the midst of human misery, free from haste and unbounded in His trust in and for humanity and, withal, the only One that offers a solution of all mankind's ills. And it is not to the creatures or gifts of God which men abuse in excessive indulgence that He points, as the cause of human wretchedness and sin, but man's own weaknesses within. The burden of His message is to beware of all that makes only for appearances; to make clean the *inside* of the platter as man's first concern; and pointing to the appalling evidences of men's sin which are all around Him, we hear Him say, "All these evil things come from within and defile the man."

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